

YRBS Open-End Responses Report

Introduction

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) was administered to Arlington High School students on December 14, 2009. As an addendum to the survey, students were asked to answer three open-ended questions, including: which topics they deem most important and why, which topics, if any, should be added to the survey, and if they had any other comments (exact question wording can be found in the appendix). The specific phrasing of the questions was revised for the 2010 survey. These questions were included on a separate, single sheet of paper, and responding was optional. 160 9th graders, 137 10th graders, 144 11th graders, 145 12th graders provided open-ended responses, and multiple responses were allowed. Results are expressed in percentages for comparison purposes.

A total of 586 students answered the open-ended questions, although the type and comprehensiveness of responses provided by individual students varied considerably. Most students answered the first question, which topics are most important, while only a handful provided topics to add to the survey and very few commented in general.

Summary

Across grades, the most common topic students noted as important to them was stress. This is particularly the case among seniors. Drugs and alcohol, mentioned together, were also often cited as critical topics, followed by sex as well as fitness and nutrition.

Detailed Results: Most Important Topics

Below are the detailed results, organized by topic, and including only those topics with the highest proportion of mentions. The complete, raw data are in the appendix.

Stress: Students across grades believe stress is the most important topic included in the survey. More females than males feel this way in grades 9-11, but this gender discrepancy disappears in grade 12. For seniors, many noted the stress of college applications coupled with their homework loads, which some indicated leads to lack of sleep as well as drug and alcohol abuse.

“My mental health suffers because of stress. I am always tired. Because of college applications, my life has been very stressful, and grades and school are my biggest areas of stress.” 12th grade female

“Stress is the thing I find hardest to avoid. I can say no to alcohol, etc., but stress is always there. There is so much pressure from society, getting into college and my own desire to succeed. It wears me down.” 11th grade female

“Stress [is most important], especially now that I am right in the thick of school, sports, and college stuff. I find myself stressed out most of the time, and it could be great to have an easy way to relax.” 12th grade male

“Seniors are super stressed, and I don’t think anyone notices. College puts too much stress on us, and I have been smoking a ton more now because of it all.” 12th grade female

“The topic of stress was most important to me because I feel incapable of succeeding at AHS. I am very stressed about my future.” 9th grade female

“I think stress is an important problem that most kids experience some of, but it is usually not talked about.” 9th grade male

“As seniors, everyone is feeling stress from everywhere and I do not think that the school is doing as much as it could to promote mental health.” 12th grade male

“Trying to succeed in school should not be this hard. I’m under so much pressure, I don’t have time to see my friends, my greatest stress reliever.” 10th grade female

“Teens are soooo stressed, and usually stress leads to drinking, drugs, depression etc.” 10th grade female

“Stress is often overlooked and can lead to some of the more serious issues such as alcohol and drug abuse.” 10th grade male

“The school needs to know that the amount of [stress] has led me to find “fun” stress relievers like pot.” 12th grade female

Drugs and Alcohol: A large proportion of students in all grades feel strongly that drugs and alcohol are important survey topics (17-20%), particularly the combination of the two rather than one or the other. The proportion of students who mentioned drugs and alcohol is similar across grades and by gender. Concern for drugs, specifically, drops from 17% in 9th grade to 9% in 12th grade, whereas mentions of just alcohol as the most important topic nearly doubles from 9th (8%) to 12th (15%) grade.

“The [questions] about drugs, alcohol, and tobacco [are most important] because they forced me to realize how much I abuse these substances and I should cut down.” 11th grade female

“Drugs and alcohol b/c there are too many kids in this school that use them. They are jeopardizing their future.” 10th grade male

“I feel like everyone at this school does drugs and uses alcohol, and I feel like I am the only one who doesn’t do anything like that.” 11th grade female

“Often kids who do these things don’t have enough knowledge about what they’re doing and how it hurts themselves and others.” 9th grade female

“It’s important because I want my friends to realize how bad it could be for them and that other than trying to be cool, there is no point in doing it.” 9th grade female

“A lot of kids at AHS use drugs and drink alcohol, and there is a ton of peer pressure with all your friends doing it.” 9th grade male

“Drinking, because I am a senior and probably do it too often.” 12th grade female

“The drinking topics were important because I and many of my friends binge drink on weekends and need help to stop. We need resources for drinking and self harm.” 12th grade female

“I know as a senior, that it is almost impossible to not be around alcohol at least some of the time, and I think it is important for the school to see what is actually happening.” 12th grade female

“[Drugs] have become a rather large issue, and no one sees anything wrong with what they are doing.” 12th grade female

“There are a whole lot of students who seem to be very high all the time.” 12th grade female

“The most important topics are about drugs because they connect to all other behaviors.” 11th grade male

Sex: Sex-related topics also received a number of mentions, particularly in 10th (15%), 11th (13%), and 12th grades (15%, versus 10% of 9th graders). Notably, substantially more females reported sex as the most important topic than did males across grades. Many students also noted that the school should have condoms available to students.

“We just don’t talk about sex enough.” 12th grade female

“Sexual health because I am sexually active and want to have more resources and information.” 12th grade female

“A lot of people are having sex, and they need to be smart.” 11th grade female

“The [sex ed] program here is a joke. I wish there were some sort of class that was actually useful and pertinent to our lives.” 11th grade male

“My sex life started recently, and I feel like there are more things I need to know.” 10th grade female

“Learning about sex and what can happen if you aren’t careful. Girls and guys should be taught the ramifications of sexual intercourse.” 9th grade female

“The fact of the matter is, if you are going to have sex, you’re going to have sex, and if you don’t have access to birth control, that probably won’t stop you.” 10th grade female

“Contraception awareness is really important because many teens need to be aware of protection options.” 12th grade female

“There is a lot information available, but there is no proactive action such as making condoms available.” 11th grade male

“The topic of contraception is most important. We should really have the option to get condoms at school.” 11th grade female

“Condoms and sex are very important because I know so many kids who have unprotected sex. They need to have condoms in school because no kid wants to go to a pharmacy or ask parents b/c it is way too embarrassing.” 10th grade male

“Students should have easier access to condoms. If you want us to have safe sex, there is no guarantee unless the school provides [them].” 9th grade male

Nutrition and Fitness: Physical fitness and nutrition are considerably more important to 9th and 10th graders (9-14% for both topics and grades) than 11th and 12th graders (6-8% for both topics and grades). Females tend to be more concerned with this topic than males, and a handful connected these topics to body image and self-esteem, noting they would rather learn about these topics than substance abuse. In addition, possibly because

we asked the question directly within the survey, several students who mentioned nutrition cited the poor quality of healthy food options within the AHS cafeteria.

“It is very important to live a healthy lifestyle. It affects everything.” 9th grade female

“High schools usually focus on drugs and substance abuse, but they don't realize that health and body weight has a huge effect on people, too. People constantly worry or care about their bodyweight, which can cause them to hurt themselves as well.” 10th grade female

“Schools always recognize drinking and drugs but never really recognize people's weight and outside appearance affects them as well.” 10th grade female

“So many people worry about how they look, but never try to exercise or eat healthy food to change in a healthy way.” 10th grade female

“It is so important to take of yourself.” 10th grade female

“The healthy food questions because we need healthier foods in the cafeteria.” 10th grade female

“Most of the food here is very unhealthy.” 10th grade male

Mental Health: Other mental health concerns, including depression, self-esteem / self-image, and general emotional health, were mentioned a moderate number of times as important topics. “Emotional health” was a term used within one of the final survey questions, which students echoed explicitly. Several felt depression to be a noteworthy topic. A handful of students also felt addressing family issues was most important, and there were very few mentions of suicide or self-harm.

“These topics are not discussed very much versus the constant stream of ‘Don't drink! Don't do drugs!’” 11th grade female

“The majority of teens have some type of image problem with themselves and don't know how to deal with it in a healthy way.” 11th grade female

“I don't think people focus on [emotional health] enough, such as depression, suicide, eating disorders, and issues with stress and anxiety. These things affect me and many of my friends.” 10th grade female

“High school can be really hard and things can often be confusing or upsetting.” 10th grade female

“Nobody even bothers to talk about depression, even though it is a serious condition that is misunderstood.” 10th grade male

“The topics on depression are the most important to me because the school system doesn't realize how many kids have depression, who cuts themselves, or wants to kill themselves.” 9th grade female

Resources: Interestingly, the need for resources and/or other adults to talk to and trust was mentioned by 4% of students overall as a very important topic. Slightly more 11th and 12th graders felt this way than students in other grades. More females than males mentioned the importance of having adults and/or resources to turn to in 9th-11th grades, but the gender split evens out in 12th grade. Many made the connection between overall

health and the need to discuss their problems and issues. The final group of questions included in the survey addressed these topics, which may explain why it was top of mind and most important for a number of students.

“If everyone has someone who supports them and talks to them, then all the other issues/topics in the survey may be dealt with.” 11th grade female

“Often kids are scared to say anything or show emotions b/c they are afraid someone might laugh at them. You need to encourage kids to speak up or talk to someone they trust.” 12th grade female

“It is hard to feel like you can trust an adult figure in the school.” 10th grade female

“If resources are made available to those who need help, in a confidential manner, I believe there could be a big impact.” 12th grade female

“Kids will do what they want, but it is important to have someone to talk to about it if things go wrong.” 12th grade male

“Feeling like we have someone to talk to because I have lots of times where I feel like I don't have someone, even though I am surrounded by lots of people who want to help me out.” 11th grade female

“People need to be able to have people to talk to about stress and ways to reduce it. Bullying can't be ignored. I'd love to have someone I could talk to about it and what I can do about it.” 10th grade female

“If someone is under a lot of stress and maybe is depressed, I think its important for them to know somebody wants to help them.” 11th grade female

Detailed Results: Topics to Add

93 students provided 111 responses to the question regarding topics to add to the survey. Of these, two topics stand out: stress/workload (25% of mentions) and peer pressure (16%). The majority of responses in general, as well as for these specific topics came from 11th and 12th graders. Several students noted the connection between schoolwork, stress, and lack of sleep.

“Spend more time asking about stress and how students deal with it rather than the stereotypical issues of drugs and alcohol.” 10th grade female

“Ask about homework loads because they really affect stress.” 12th grade male

“How much homework stresses you out, how much you get, can you handle it, etc.” 11th grade female

“Time spent on schoolwork should be added because I think most kids do too much. I also think you should add questions about sleep habits b/c many kids do not get enough sleep because of their school work.” 11th grade male

“How much homework we get and what that does to our stress and amount of sleep we lose.” 12th grade female

“I was expecting more questions about sleeping habits. I think many people do not get enough sleep because of the amount of homework they have.” 9th grade female

“Peer pressure. It is important to make sure that people aren't being forced to do things against their will.” 12th grade female

“Questions about friends and peer pressure because people encounter it more and more as they get older.” 11th grade female

8% of respondents to this question recommended adding questions regarding abuse (physical, emotional, or family), and another 8% suggested questions should more directly address depression. Otherwise, remaining responses were quite variable.

Recommendations

General: Given its high and widespread importance, AHS counselors and administrators should address stress with all students on a regular basis. This is particularly the case for 11th and 12th graders, for whom their workload and college applications are top of mind. Providing students with consistent and clear organizational and stress management skills may reduce stress, which should coincide with a reduction in risky behaviors. Even providing overwhelmed students with a voluntary, school-based stress management resource may help them feel supported and, consequently, less stressed and anxious.

Students are clamoring for more information regarding sex and, in many cases, specifically regarding contraception. Consequently, AHS should consider revising its sexual health curriculum to emphasize contraception options and resources. In addition, AHS should make condoms available to students who want them, preferably in an anonymous and easily accessible manner. As many respondents noted, this could serve to increase safe sex practices among students.

The need for resources, particularly for drugs and alcohol as well as mental health, is also clear. Currently available resources should be publicized and promoted to the student body, an act that in itself signals acknowledgement and understanding of students' situations and difficulties. Students should also be encouraged to find a trusted adult, inside or outside the school, with whom they can discuss their concerns, and school-based adults who are willing and available to meet with students should be touted.

Open-Ended Question Phrasing and Set Up: The updated open-end question phrasing used in this survey iteration, revised to clarify the intent of student responses, seems to have led students to provide detailed information that can be accurately interpreted. In future iterations, the questions should be kept in their current form.

Appendix

Question text:

- 1) Which specific topic(s) included in this survey are most important to you? Why?
- 2) Should additional topics be added? If yes, which ones? Why those topics?
- 3) Do you have any other comments on the survey and/or the questions asked?

Raw data are on following page.

Results Compilation

Compilation	n=586															
	9th Grade				10th Grade				11th Grade				12th Grade			
	Male (n=64)	Female (n=95)	Total (n=160)	160	Male (n=55)	Female (n=82)	Total (n=137)	137	Male (n=62)	Female (n=80)	Total (n=144)	144	Male (n=46)	Female (n=92)	Total (n=145)	145
Stress	9	30	39	24%	8	25	33	24%	10	20	30	21%	13	29	42	29%
Depression	3	5	8	5%	0	2	2	1%	3	6	9	6%	0	3	3	2%
Emotional Health	4	4	8	5%	1	4	5	4%	1	5	6	4%	6	3	9	6%
Self-Esteem, Image	2	2	4	3%	2	1	3	2%	1	7	8	6%	2	3	5	3%
Self harm	2	2	4	3%	4	2	6	4%	0	2	2	1%	1	0	1	1%
Suicide	0	2	2	1%	0	2	2	1%	2	0	2	1%	2	2	4	3%
Substance Abuse (general)	10	22	32	20%	11	13	24	18%	11	17	28	19%	11	14	25	17%
Drugs	15	12	27	17%	12	5	17	12%	13	4	17	12%	5	8	13	9%
Alcohol	7	6	13	8%	3	0	3	2%	5	7	12	8%	11	10	21	15%
Tobacco	4	5	9	6%	1	2	3	2%	1	3	4	3%	2	3	5	3%
Overall Health	2	1	3	2%	1	3	4	3%	0	2	2	1%	1	2	3	2%
Fitness / Physical Activity	9	6	15	9%	7	12	19	14%	7	4	11	8%	0	10	10	7%
Nutrition / Healthy Eating	7	10	17	11%	3	16	19	14%	3	7	10	7%	0	8	8	6%
Weight	1	2	3	2%	0	1	1	1%	0	2	2	1%	0	1	1	1%
Body Image	2	3	5	3%	0	10	10	7%	3	8	11	8%	0	10	10	7%
Safety / Violence / Weapons	2	0	2	1%	2	2	4	3%	1	1	2	1%	2	1	3	2%
Bullying	1	1	2	1%	0	2	2	1%	2	1	3	2%	2	2	4	3%
Sex	6	10	16	10%	9	12	21	15%	6	13	19	13%	3	19	22	15%
Abuse (general)	0	0	0	0%	0	3	3	2%	0	1	1	1%	1	1	2	1%
Family	0	3	3	2%	0	1	1	1%	1	3	4	3%	1	2	3	2%
Adult trust, support, resources	0	4	4	3%	0	4	4	3%	0	6	6	4%	3	4	7	5%